ROBERT VESCO

JOHN MITCHELL

MAURICE STANS

ANOTHER CIA ROLE What role did an anonymous CIA agent play in obtaining the release of Robert Vesco, the fugitive financier, from a Swiss jail?

In 1971 Vesco and two of his associates were jailed by a Swiss judge on charges of misusing a shareholder's stock. They were sent to Geneva's 150-year-old St. Antoine Prison. Word was immediately relayed to Harry Sears, a lawyer who was Republican majority leader in the New Jersey Senate and chairman of the New Jersey Committee to Reelect Richard Nixon.

Sears promptly notified Attorney General John N. Mitchell in Washington, D.C., who then phoned the U.S. embassy in Berne, asked counselor Richard Vine to investigate the matter. Vesco, after all, was a heavy Republican Party contributor.

Duly impressed, Vine contacted a top U.S. embassy official who was in reality a top CIA agent. The agent in turn called the chief of Swiss intelligence, told him of the "high government" interest in Vesco. The following day Vesco was released on $125,000 bail and left Geneva.

Subsequently he paid Sears $10,000 for his helpful phone call to Mitchell. Later he offered $500,000 to Maurice Stans, Nixon's chief fund raiser.

Under the circumstances Stans thought it prudent to accept only $250,000—$200,000 in cash and $50,000 in a check—part of which was used to pay off the Watergate Plumbers. This led to the indictment of Maurice Stans and John Mitchell in New York and a court trial that Vesco declined to attend. Mitchell and Stans were acquitted, and Mitchell's Justice Department made "curiously weak" attempts to extradite Vesco from Costa Rica and the Bahamas.

Robert Vesco has been accused of looting at least $224 million from overseas mutual funds — some authorities estimate the loot as high as $280 million. He has been accused of defrauding one company of $50,000, and of making an illegal payoff to the 1972 Nixon reelection campaign. He still employs Nixon's nephew, Donald A. Nixon, who used to handle some of his prostitute traffic in London, and he may well be the top financial swindler of modern times.

Sen. Frank Church's committee, charged with investigating various government intelligence agencies, might well look into the CIA role in obtaining Vesco's release from St. Antoine Prison, and Edward Levi, President Ford's new Attorney General, might well examine the background of the Justice Department's failure to extradite Vesco who is now living in Costa Rican splendor.